The New York Times

MOVIES | FILM REVIEW

FILM REVIEW; Spicing Austen's 1806 With Dashes of 1999

By STEPHEN HOLDEN NOV. 18, 1999

"My God, this is 1806, for heaven's sake!" a character exclaims in "Mansfield Park," Patricia Rozema's smart, politically pointed screen adaptation of Jane Austen's third novel. This reminder of how every age foolishly fancies itself the most progressive and enlightened in the history of the world is drenched in irony. And it speaks to the heart of a film that is determined to invest Austen with as many prickly contemporary resonances as it can shoehorn in without appearing wildly anachronistic.

"Mansfield Park" takes special pains to remind us that the glory of the British empire and the comfortable life of the novel's landed gentry were the products of colonial exploitation. Where the novel alludes to the slave trading business of Sir Thomas Bertram (Harold Pinter), the pompous authoritarian who owns the estate called Mansfield Park, the movie rubs our faces in his dirty business.

The novel's rather meek central character, Fanny Price (Frances O'Connor), has been retooled and pumped up for the film into a spunky Jane Austen stand-in who recites directly to the camera fragments from Austen's letters and diaries. The movie's Fanny is an ambitious, willful writer from a poor background whose unstoppable intellectual drive is synonymous with her integrity. Her categorical rejection of Henry Crawford (Alessandro Nivola), a wealthy aristocratic dreamboat whom Sir Thomas insists she marry, marks her as a proto-feminist heroine who risks losing everything by standing up to male authority.

Other modern touches include blatant drug addiction and hints of lesbianism.

Sir Thomas's wife, Lady Bertram (Lindsay Duncan), is a bleary-eyed, nodding-out junkie in the thrall of the opiate laudanum. Fanny's friendship with Henry's sophisticated, scheming sister, Mary (Embeth Davidtz), who looks so much like Fanny she could almost be her twin, has a strong lesbian undercurrent, and in one scene the two women narrowly avoid falling into a passionate kiss. In another scene (not in the novel), Fanny discovers Henry in bed with someone else's wife. Fanny, although suitably appalled, appears to know enough about the birds and the bees not to require smelling salts after barging in on the pair in full sexual gallop.

In the hands of a less talented filmmaker, this extensive tinkering and modernizing might seem irritating and pretentious. But in peering beneath Austen's genteel surfaces and scraping away the Hollywood gloss that traditionally accrues to screen adaptations of Austen, Ms. Rozema has made a film whose satiric bite is sharper than that of the usual high-toned romantic costume drama.

Accentuating the aspects of "Mansfield Park" that lend it the aura of a feminist fable about women, power and money, Ms. Rozema turns it into the story of a clever, willful woman who grits her teeth and, in a reckless gamble, evades the dictates of an oppressive patriarchal society. One of the chief obstacles to Fanny's self-fulfillment is her poverty. Sent by her poor family in Portsmouth to live with wealthy relatives in Mansfield Park, she is treated like a servant and told that her lack of means has made her an unlikely candidate for a good marriage. The autocratic Sir Thomas, who rules the palace, ignores Fanny until she matures into a pretty young thing, at which point he can barely keep his hands off her.

One element of the story Ms. Rozema hasn't updated is Fanny's abiding love for Edmund (Jonny Lee Miller), Sir Thomas's goody-goody bookworm of a younger son, who forgoes the family business to become a clergyman. In keeping with 19th-century romantic convention, it isn't until the very end that Edmund comes to his senses and realizes that Fanny (and not Mary, who in one startling scene reveals herself to be a kind of period Joan Collins character) is the love of his life.

The film's portrayal of early-19th-century affluence is notably more austere than in other film adaptations of Austen, which surround the characters in ruffles and flourishes. Mansfield Park is an imposing but sparsely accommodated palace

whose overall grimness mirrors the constricting puritanical morality of English society and Fanny's prisonlike confinement within social convention. Casting Ms. Duncan in the dual roles of Fanny's impoverished mother (who married for love and ended up in desperate straits) and her well-to-do but drug-addicted aunt, Lady Bertram, suggests the harsh choices forced on women in those days.

The absence of frilly decor also allows the director to concentrate on the characters. Ms. O'Connor's likable Fanny suggests a quick-witted, wised-up 90's version of a 1940's Jennifer Jones heroine. Biting his lips and looking alternately sheepish and pious, Mr. Miller reins in his swashbuckling energy to make a credibly humble Edmund. Mr. Nivola's Henry conveys the pouting narcissism lurking just beneath a surface charm. But the movie's most imposing performance is Mr. Pinter's thunderous Sir Bertram. A quintessential 19th-century English patriarch, he is the embodiment of an overweening male authority, which the upstart Fanny and subsequent generations of rebellious women feel impelled to disobey.

The movie is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has sexual situations.

MANSFIELD PARK

Written and directed by Patricia Rozema; based on the novel "Mansfield Park" by Jane Austen, and her letters and early journals; director of photography, Michael Coulter; edited by Martin Walsh; music by Lesley Barber; production designer, Christopher Hobbs; produced by Sarah Curtis; released by Miramax Films and BBC Films. Running time: 105 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

WITH: Embeth Davidtz (Mary Crawford), Jonny Lee Miller (Edmund Bertram), Alessandro Nivola (Henry Crawford), Frances O'Connor (Fanny Price), Lindsay Duncan (Mrs. Price, Lady Bertram) and Harold Pinter (Sir Thomas Bertram).

© 2016 The New York Times Company